

Pensacola News Journal  
for: Sunday, Sept. 3, 2000  
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## **Fall Color Requires Planning**

Our part of the country is noted for beautiful beaches, rivers and forests, but not for fall color. Though we enjoy the seasonal changes in many natural areas, ours doesn't compare with the leaf color that is seen in the hardwood forests of the Northeast.

We could have much more fall color in our landscapes if we planned for it. Our biggest obstacle to overcome is the almost exclusive use of broadleaf evergreens.

The use of deciduous plants is the key to having fall leaf color in the landscape. There are many species of native trees and shrubs that offer this characteristic. By establishing some diversity, which includes the establishment of both evergreen and deciduous plants, a much more interesting landscape is possible.

The fall planting season is approaching. With this in mind, following are some comments and my choices of the top five native plants for fall leaf color.

1. Florida Red Maple is classified as a medium sized tree at maturity. It provides deep red and orange color as the nights cool down. There are many different species of maple, but they won't consistently color up as well as this Florida native. Make sure that any red maple trees that are purchased are from local stock. Those from other geographical areas, though they might look the same, generally don't perform as well as local biotypes.
2. Sweet Gum is a large growing tree that provides excellent fall color in hues of orange, yellow, red and purple on star-shaped leaves. It usually grows with a central leader, resulting in a symmetrical, cone-shaped crown until advanced age.
3. Oakleaf Hydrangea is a native shrub with large oak-like leaves that change to bronze in

the fall. It grows well under partial shade and also produces clusters of white flowers in April that later change to purple. The mature height is about six feet, making it a good understory landscape plant.

4. One species of black gum or sour gum tree, *Nyssa sylvatica*, yields maroon red leaf color every September regardless of the weather conditions. It should not be confused with other black gums such as water tupelo and ogeechee tupelo. *Nyssa sylvatica* grows under a broad range of soil conditions, while the other species often have more specific requirements.

5. The hickories are often overlooked, and in doing so, we are missing some excellent yellow color during October and November. There are twelve different species listed as native to Northwest Florida, with the pignut hickory, *Carya glabra*, being one of several good choices for landscaping.

**Question of the Week:** I have a Japanese boxwood hedge that was planted fifteen years ago. Now suddenly the boxwood is dying. What can be done to save the remaining ones?

**Answer:** Japanese boxwood is very susceptible to root-knot nematodes. Check the roots of living plants by carefully digging into the root system in several places. Look for feeder roots with small bumps or knots that appear to be a part of the roots, rather than attached to them.

If root-knot is found, then your plants have been struggling without a complete, functioning root system for several years. The recent drought and heat would have tended to magnify the symptoms of such a root problem.

There is no nematicide that can be recommended at this time. Instead of a chemical treatment, try to compensate for the root damage by preventing any moisture stress. Maintain a good mulch around the plants and provide optimum moisture.

If root-knot damage is not evident, take a good sample of damaged, but not dead portions to your local nursery, garden center, landscape professional or Extension agent for diagnosis.